



## Research Library

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## Buffalo Ku Klux Klan Collection

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**Call Number:** Mss. A90-22  
**Creator:**  
**Title:** Buffalo Ku Klux Klan Papers  
**Date(s):** 1922-1977, bulk 1922-1925  
**Language(s):** English  
**Location:** Manuscript room (oversized material is shelved in oversized flat file)  
**Size:** 0.3 linear feet (2 folders and 1 oversize folder)

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**Acquisition Information:** Accession no. 90-81; 2017-67  
**Donor:** Father Nelson, Canisius College; 1988-89; Michael Guerra, Sr.  
**Restrictions:** None  
**Preferred Citation:** Buffalo History Museum Research Library, Mss. A90-22, Buffalo Ku Klux Klan Papers  
**Processing Information:** Described by Paul C. Heyde and Cynthia Van Ness, April 2011  
**Collection Access:** Researchers wishing to access this collection must apply for a [Scholar Pass](#) and present valid photo ID upon arrival to the library.

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### Biographical / Historical Note:

In the early 1920s, after decades of dormancy, the Ku Klux Klan was resurgent, gaining new recruits in the Northeast by using modern sales techniques in which recruiters received commissions for signing new members. Capitalizing on anxieties about "foreigners" and racial purity, the Klan found new members in locales with otherwise strong traditions of interracial progress and tolerance. Buffalo was one such city.

Openly advocating white supremacy and white nationalism, the Klan was known for racist rhetoric and violence against African-Americans, Jews, Catholics, and immigrants. They also promised opportunities for business contacts, fraternal bonding, mystical ritual, and community improvement, casting themselves as defenders of Anglo-Saxon Protestant notions of morality and decency.

The Klan's arrival in Buffalo in 1921 exploited a bitter mayoral campaign that pitted Francis X. Schwab (1874-1946), a brewery owner born to German Catholic immigrants, against Protestant Yale-educated "establishment" attorney George S. Buck (1875-1931). The electorate divided along religious, class, and ethnic lines and Schwab, who had campaigned in opposition to Prohibition, won a narrow victory, becoming Buffalo's first Roman Catholic mayor.

In spite of hostility to the Klan from the Buffalo press, the Catholic Diocese, and leading rabbis and African Americans, the Buffalo chapter's first public ceremony took place in a vacant field on Harlem Road on October 25, 1922. The Klan soon found allies among white middle-class Protestants, who considered Mayor Schwab's administration to be corrupt and tolerant of vice, as demonstrated by his unwillingness to prosecute illegal drinking establishments. Known elsewhere for racist violence, in Buffalo the Klan was belligerent about the lax enforcement of Prohibition.

Operating out of the Calumet Building, 46-58 W. Chippewa Street, in offices rented by Kay-Bee Adsign Company, a KKK "front," the Klan was soon infiltrated by undercover Buffalo police officer Edward Oberlean, who supplied intelligence directly to Mayor Schwab.

By the summer of 1924, battle lines were clearly drawn and the antagonism between Klan supporters and opponents erupted in the open. Anti-Klan efforts were led by the United Sons of America and the Liberty League. Rising tensions culminated in the bombing on April 18, 1924 of 34 Gallatin Street, the home of Rev. Littleton E. H. Smith, a Klan supporter. The family was not at home at the time. The culprits were never found. Buffalo was on the edge of religious warfare.

Klan headquarters were ransacked on July 3, 1924, and the membership list was stolen, perhaps by or with the assistance of Schwab's undercover agents. The list was soon in the hands of police, who promptly put it on public display. Thousands of Buffalonians flocked to view the roster and note the names of friends, neighbors, and associates, many of whom quickly distanced themselves from the organization. The member list was soon published as a pamphlet titled *Expose of Traitors* and sold on the street.

The theft of its records and public exposure threw the Buffalo Klan into disarray and internal dissension. On the evening of August 31, 1924, Thomas Austin, a Klan investigator sent from Atlanta to investigate the break-in, guessed the nature of Edward Oberlean's involvement in the Klan and confronted him in front of 128 Durham Street. The two men exchanged gunfire and were both killed. The ensuing public investigation and prosecution precipitated the decline of the Klan in Buffalo, and by the time Mayor Schwab was reelected in a landslide in 1925, it was no longer a viable organization. Its Buffalo office closed down in late 1925.

By Cynthia Van Ness

### **Bibliography:**

Jackson, Kenneth T. *The Ku Klux Klan in the city, 1915-1930*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1967.  
Kowalski, Daniel. *The Ku Klux Klan in Buffalo, New York, 1922-1924: A Case Study*. Greensboro, NC: MA Thesis, University of North Carolina, 1972.  
Lay, Shawn. *Hooded Knights on the Niagara: The Ku Klux Klan in Buffalo, New York*. New York: New York University Press, 1995.

### **Scope and Content Note:**

Collection includes *Expose of Traitors* listing names and addresses of Buffalo-area Klan members, business directory, admission ticket to Klan meeting, letters, a charter petition, court deposition, clippings, member lists, and typed reports from an unnamed police informant (probably Officer Oberlean). Materials date from circa 1922 to 1925 with the exception of one *Buffalo Evening News* clipping from 1977 on the resurgence of the Klan.

**Arrangement:** Chronological

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### **Subject Headings:**

Ku Klux Klan (1915-) – New York (State) – Buffalo

Nativism – New York (State) – Buffalo

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### **Folder List:**

Folder 1: Admittance ticket; letters, charter petition; court deposition, 1922-1925, clippings, 1924-1977

Folder 2: *Expose of Traitors* (including photocopy); business directory; Michael Guerra letter about his father, Josephs Guerra, printing copies of *Expose of Traitors*

Oversize folder: Member lists and typed reports from police informant (140 leaves, 36 x 42 cm).